

Death-Defying

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55 NIV)

The truth is that the great enemy of humanity is death. We have sayings like, "There's nothing so certain as death and taxes," because our experience is that one out of every one people dies in the end. Despite that, we seem hard-wired to hope against hope that somehow we'll avoid it. These days people put their hope in medicine, diet, exercise and even plastic surgery – anything to avoid the reality of ageing and death. The problem is that those things may extend life a little, or perhaps help us to pretend that we're not getting older, but they don't change the statistics.

We don't need someone who can put off death for a little bit, we need someone who has defeated it.

In the Easter period of the church calendar we've been working our way through the end of 1 Corinthians and particularly 1 Corinthians 15. In that chapter Paul has shown us Jesus as the one person who has defeated death (vv.1-11). He truly died and truly rose again to new life. He has tied Jesus' resurrection to ours. Jesus is the firstfruits in God's harvest for his kingdom, as those who trust in Jesus can also defeat death and rise again with new bodies (vv.20-23).

Now towards the end of the chapter, in verses 54-55, Paul quotes a couple of verses from the Old Testament (Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14) to take us to the conclusion of his argument. It's this: death is no longer the great enemy, because death has been swallowed up and defeated. In particular, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have enabled sin to be forgiven and so death to be defeated. So these prophecies have been fulfilled. In vv.56 and 57 Paul goes on:

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:56-57 NIV)

This chapter is a great comfort to believers either when they face their own deaths or the death of believing friends and family. It reminds us that the old enemy is no more and gives us confidence for the future – those who trust in Jesus will rise again!

The former Liverpool football club manager Bill Shankly is famous for saying:

"Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I don't like that attitude. I can assure them it is much more serious than that."

I seriously doubt that's true about football, but I'm certain it's true about holding to the gospel message. Paul finishes the chapter with these words:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58 NIV)

If we hold to the gospel message then our work of telling it to people is not in vain. Why? Because the message we share isn't just life and death, it's eternal life and eternal death.

Perhaps this month you need to hear the comfort of this chapter. Perhaps you need to hear the challenge to stand firm. Perhaps you need to be reminded to give yourself fully to living and proclaiming message of Jesus.